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Free Massages Blend Hype and Healing in Marketing to Hispanics

By [ANDY NEWMAN](#)

Correction Appended

HAIALEAH, Fla. — The showroom in the Villaverde Shopping Center looked kind of like a morgue one recent morning. Fifteen bodies lay supine on narrow beds, their faces covered with hospital-green cloths.

The room fell briefly silent. Then just beneath the surface of the beds, hot jade-stone rollers made their way up arching, aching backs, and a familiar song swelled from the speakers on the wall.

Here's the place where a healthy life begins,

The place where a wonderful love story begins.

Here's where the precious encounter takes place.

This place is Cera-, Ceragem.

Ceragem is the name of the bed, and the name of the Korean company that makes the bed, and the name of the store here and 500 like it around the world. The product has attracted a following among Hispanic customers in South Florida and elsewhere.

They stream in all day long for free 40-minute mechanical massages that fuse principles of chiropractic and Eastern medicine. And Ceragem users are urged to try the beds in the store for as many weeks or months as they like.

"It's a habit of life, like bathing or eating," said Mariela Palacio, a co-owner of the Hialeah store.

Though the medical authorities have scoffed, many customers have become convinced that the beds can cure a variety of serious ailments, and have paid \$3,000 to buy one.

Nearly half of the 61 Ceragem franchises in the United States are in Hispanic neighborhoods; metropolitan Miami has three stores (Hialeah, next door to Miami, has the highest percentage of Spanish speakers of any city of 100,000 or more in the country).

Jerry Haar, a management professor at Florida International University who has studied the Hispanic market, said it seemed a natural match for Ceragem's product and marketing technique, which combines word-of-mouth advertising and church-style testifying.

"Hispanics are more amenable than many groups to considering nontraditional treatments," Professor Haar

said, citing the popularity among some Latinos, particularly among the uninsured, of curanderos, or lay healers, and botanicas, where products that combine spiritual and medical properties are sold. “And in ethnic enclaves, franchises like this have the greatest success. A lot of people believe my compadre, my friend, wouldn’t sell me something that’s a bunch of bull.”

On Thanksgiving morning in North Miami, 20 people filed into Jesús Reyes’s Ceragem store, sat before a small stage and took turns telling their stories. A woman who could not walk a few months ago had changed a tire. A [stroke victim](#) had become able to feed himself.

Four canes were hanging on an easel — abandoned after their owners had discovered Ceragem, Mr. Reyes said. On the wall behind him, a sign in Spanish read “Love, Service, Kindness,” the Ceragem credo.

Gladys Rodriguez, 53, said that Ceragem had lowered her [cholesterol](#), and helped her nephew in Guatemala walk after a car accident that for a time had left him in a coma.

“Thank you first to God,” Ms. Rodriguez said, “then to Jesús” — meaning Mr. Reyes — “because he opened the door to all of us, and to the scientists who made this bed.”

At the heart of a Ceragem massage are the jade rollers, heated to the limits of comfort. They travel slowly up and down either side of the spine, pausing at crucial pressure points. The user’s own weight supplies the pressure, intense but generally pleasurable. The last part of the session involves sitting on a chair outfitted with a line of egg-shaped bulbs down the center of the seat. The hot bulbs deliver a startling sensation to the uninitiated.

The Ceragem thermal massage system has been approved by the [Food and Drug Administration](#) for temporary relief from [arthritis](#) pain and similar aches. But the company has run into resistance when it has tried to claim anything more.

In Texas last year, Ceragem International Inc., the company’s American wing, paid a \$180,000 settlement after the authorities said it made false claims that the beds cured [cancer](#) and [heart disease](#). Greg Abbott, the Texas attorney general, said the beds’ marketing amounted to “orchestrated consumer health fraud,” and Dr. Eduardo J. Sanchez, the commissioner of state health services, agreed.

“Our investigators documented an alarming incidence of false health claims associated with Ceragem’s beds,” Dr. Sanchez said after the Texas investigation. “Consumers should not rely on these claims. These beds are not substitutes for prescribed medicines and treatments.”

In Florida, local and state consumer protection authorities said they had received no complaints about Ceragem.

Somehow, despite the perpetual free-trial policy, beds get sold. Mr. Reyes said he had sold 100 in his store’s first year; Ms. Palacio and her husband, Carlos Palacio, said their Hialeah store sells 300 a year. Ceragem International, based in Los Angeles, said its 2005 sales were \$30 million.

Ms. Rodriguez, a regular at the North Miami store since March, said that even if she eventually bought a bed, she would return to the store once a week to share her story.

On the stage, the next round of testimonials had begun.

“Five herniated disks!” crowed Osmar Casas, 71, as he set down his cane and walked quick laps around the store. People applauded from their beds.

Mr. Reyes, the store owner, led the audience in a cheer.

“1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10,” they shouted. “Ceragem! New life!”

“O.K.,” Mr. Reyes called. “Let’s get to the beds!”

Correction: Dec. 2, 2006

Because of an editing error, an article yesterday about the popularity of a thermal massage bed, Ceragem, included an erroneous reference in some copies to the location of a store owned by Mariela and Carlos Palacio. It is in Hialeah, Fla., not North Miami.

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